

Suggested Remarks
Gloria D. Steele, USAID Mission Director
Barangay Justice Advocates' Congress
Barangay Justice for Peace Project
Gateway Suites, Araneta Center, Cubao, Q.C.
September 17, 2010, 9:00 a.m.

Ms. Judy Araneta Roxas, Chairperson and
President of the Gerry Roxas Foundation;

The courageous and dedicated men and women who
serve as barangay justice advocates;

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen;

Magandang umaga po sa inyong lahat.

I am delighted to be with all of you this
morning to celebrate the achievements of the
Barangay Justice for Peace Project. Our
partnership with the Gerry Roxas Foundation

(GRF), local government units and a variety of non-government organizations in Mindanao in promoting peace through community-based dispute resolution is a source of pride for the U.S. Government and the American people. We are truly honored to be part of this important event.

Since the mid-1990s, USAID has increasingly endeavored through its programs not only to promote Mindanao's social and economic development but also reduce the sources of its conflicts and build conditions for peace. In 2009 alone, the American people contributed over \$70 million to support various development programs in Mindanao. Working closely with the Philippines government, national and local, the business sector and non-governmental

organizations, USAID supports initiatives in Mindanao to spur economic growth, improve health, strengthen governance, protect the environment, increase access to education, and promote peace.

While the mix of programs across the economic, health, governance, environment and education sectors has made significant inroads in improving the quality of life in Mindanao, development will stagnate if conflict continues to take innocent lives, dislocate people, force them to abandon their economic activities, and create an impression of Mindanao as a very unstable region of the Philippines.

The causes of conflict in Mindanao are deep-rooted and complex. Interestingly, many cases

of violence are caused by small incidents that, because of the absence of a mechanism to address grievances, are left to fester until they erupt into deadly conflict. A study conducted by The Asia foundation with USAID support in 2005 clearly showed that more people are negatively affected on a daily basis by wars between extended families or "rido" as it is more commonly referred to in Mindanao. The study revealed more than 1,200 existing clan conflicts in just 10 out of Mindanao's 25 provinces.

While preparing for this event, I had the opportunity to read a book published by the Gerry Roxas Foundation entitled, "Peace Among Us." The book contains true stories of conflict and reconciliation selected from the

thousands of disputes mediated by barangay justice advocates (BJAs) in any given year. It is such an eye-opener to read accounts of how two families who have lived peacefully side by side for generations can suddenly be involved in violent conflict. Disputes over resources, political rivalries, business disagreements, petty quarrels and perceived affronts to family honor, without a mechanism to provide an appropriate and timely settlement, quickly degenerate into violence engulfing entire clans and resulting in deaths and injuries to many, destruction of property, dislocation of families, and loss of economic productivity.

But what I find amazing are the stories of courage, dedication and hope exemplified by the BJAs. The book told stories about

extraordinary men and women who used their own resources and risked their lives to end violence and achieve peace. Over the course of many days, often shuttling from one family to another, BJAs relied on their training and their intimate understanding of tradition and culture to bring conflict to an end.

We are very pleased that the US government, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has been able to support the work of GRF in strengthening community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. In addition to bringing resolution to high profile "rido" cases, thousands of volunteer mediators are working everyday to successfully settle disputes and prevent their escalation into violent conflict.

The project has also significantly enhanced the role of women as peace makers in many traditionally male-dominated communities, and provided people who otherwise would not have access to justice a venue to settle disputes and seek redress from grievances.

In closing, I would like to especially recognize the dedication and commitment of the BJAs for their service to their communities. We hope that many others will follow their example and become instruments of peace.

The U.S. Government also looks forward to supporting peace in Mindanao through its other programs.

Maraming salamat po at mabuhay kayong lahat!